

Video Art : an Unfinished History

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REFERENCES

Malin Hedlin Hayden, *Video Art Historicized: Traditions and Negotiations*, Londres : Routledge, 2017, (Studies in Art Historiography)
Video Writings by Artists (1970-1990), Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2017. Sous la dir. d'Eugeni Bonet
Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks, Lausanne : Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne, 2017. Sous la dir. de François Bovier
Bill Viola: Installations = Installationen, Cologne : Snoeck, 2017. Sous la dir. de Dirk Luckow, Kira Perov

- 1 Nearly every book about video art starts with the same observation: how difficult, if not impossible, it is to come up with a definition of the medium. Half a century after it appeared, we may well wonder why the writing of a history of video art still poses problems. Furthermore, the difficulty of putting a precise date on the beginnings of this praxis is still symptomatic: 1963, for the first installations produced by Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, using TV sets? 1965, for the first videos filmed with a Portapak by the same Nam June Paik and Andy Warhol? But over and above these historically wavering outlines, it is the actual definition of video art that poses a problem. On the one hand, the researcher François Bovier wonders how to define a visual product that is essentially hybrid, "impure" and "capable of absorbing all forms of artistic expression".¹ On the other hand, Eugeni Bonet questions how to broach a praxis which has always been "synonymous with plurality and diversity rather than disciplinary unity".² In *Video Art Historicized: Traditions and Negotiations*, Malin Hedin Hayden, a professor at Stockholm University, pinpoints another pitfall, involving a gap between a praxis that has always sought to usher in the notion of art and a historiography which has not managed to get

away from the usual concepts in order to grasp it, re-including video art within the framework of a traditional history of art.

- 2 Whence the importance and necessity, today, of going back to ground-breaking video art writings and events, the better to understand not only the artistic context in which video art has developed, but also what video art has “done” to art. Because, as Françoise Parfait³ has demonstrated, video is also a conceptual tool which has made it possible to think about and experiment with new forms of representation. In this sense, it has played a significant part in re-defining the field of art. The anthology *Video Writings by Artists (1970-1990)* is very useful in this respect. It includes some thirty essays written between 1972 and 1990 by artists who were involved in the early days of video art, and who, at times, with a few years of hindsight, propose a re-reading of its history, as well as its myths. The essays by Bill Viola, Martha Rosler and Paul Ryan, grouped together in the anthology’s final chapter, titled “History and Myths reviewed”, are well worth rediscovering. *Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks* returns, for its part, to the emergence of video in the French-speaking Swiss scene in 1974, in two associated events: an international exhibition of video art at the Galerie Impact, and the experimental film festival, *New Forms in Film*, held in Montreux, and organized by Annette Michelson. Starting from these two events, the book questions the circulation methods for both works and artists, and, more broadly, the process of institutionalizing video art. The catalogue *Bill Viola*, published for the exhibition *Bill Viola: Installations* held at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg in 2017, helps, for its part, to incarnate a moment in this history of video. By way of writings and very large format illustrations, this publication goes back over Bill Viola’s career, from his early videos made in 1974. It underscores the continuity of his work by emphasizing the extreme slow motion of the images, their pictorial nature (“living paintings”) and the spiritual and essentially metaphysical dimension underpinning them. These four books, each in their own way, thus highlight a moment and an aspect of the medium (attempts at and sketches of theoreticization; analysis of the distribution and circulation of works; a monograph about one of today’s most recognized video-makers). If an all-encompassing history of video art still remains to be written, these publishing milestones nevertheless contribute to its preparation, like so many fragments.

NOTES

1. Bovier, François. “The Diffuse Networks of Video Art and the Institutionalization of Artists’ Films in the 1970s”, *Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks*, Lausanne : Ecole cantonale d’art de Lausanne, 2017, p. 41
2. Bonet, Eugeni. “Videology / Videography: On the Practice and Medium of Video”, *Video Writings by Artists (1970-1990)*, Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2017, p. 8
3. Parfait, Françoise. *Vidéo : un art contemporain*, Paris : Le Regard, 2001

AUTHORS

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Géraldine Sfez is a lecturer in film studies at the University of Lille 3, and is a member of the CEAC (Centre for the Study of the Contemporary Arts). Her research focuses on the aesthetics and theory of contemporary visual arts and is organized mainly around the relations between film and contemporary art. In particular, from 2012 to 2015 at the INHA, with Riccardo Venturi, she organized the seminar “Ecrans exposés: cinéma, art contemporain, médias”. Continuing the lines of thought developed during that seminar, she has published “Faire défiler des images. Du *flip book* aux écrans tactiles”, with Riccardo Venturi, in the magazine *Spécimen*, no.8, “Captures d’écrans”, January 2015; and “Corps appareillés, gestes redispisés”, which will be published in the electronic magazine *Fabula* in 2018.